

Re-inhabiting one's "own body": women take the floor

*"There is something else.
Something else
means that I love what I like
and what I do."*

J. Prévert

1. "I am in my living body"

The evocative use of black and white in the 36 photographs arranged by Libera Mazzoleni, in a sequence that reflects the many meanings of the kiss and the gestures that accompany it, immediately catches the eye, involving it in an emotional journey into the many nuances of affectivity and feeling that brings the bodies of different women together, as they are free to express tenderness, desire and passion.

The heads come closer, the lips touch and the faces brush against one another. The hands caress the hair, rest delicately on the cheeks and wrap them in an embrace. The fingers touch the mouth, the chin and the nose. The gazes meet in a soft and complicit smile. The eyes close in the ecstasy of the moment that suspends time in a present characterised by fullness.

These gestures, which make contact possible, are one with the body that, in the reciprocity of the emotions felt by the people involved, is never "anonymous flesh". It is only ever a "*living body*", with the ability to feel, desire, to move towards the other, and a "*lived body*" in the first person, therefore traversed by the entirety of the life story of the subject who feels embodied and rooted in their own body.

Edith Stein focuses this immediate experience of herself in the expression: "*I am in my living body*". Unique and singular, it is always with me and never leaves me. In friendship, in love and in my relationship with myself, I am always present with my body, which I inhabit as my home and my opening to the world and to others.

In her work "il bacio" (the kiss), Libera Mazzoleni places this newfound unity of her being with her body at the centre of attention with the complicity of other women. Indirectly, she takes a stand against schizophrenic Cartesian dualism, abstract Platonic asceticism, the mysticism of Christianity and every form of spiritualism which, by establishing the ethical primacy of the spirit, reduces the body to a prison of the soul, a dark realm of sexual instincts, a place of sin.

By devaluing the body, every feeling must be stripped of all its sensual connotations, and its irrepressible sexuality must be channelled into alleged natural laws that impose heterosexuality as its model and as a cipher of normality.

2. Sexual difference erased by patriarchal ideology

It was patriarchal ideology that would go on to situate nature as the ontological root of heterosexuality by emphasising the fact that people are born male and female. It automatically judged any social behaviour that deviates from that model or contradicts it as deviant, guilty and perverse. The patriarchy — which thinks of masculinity as a universal for humanity and establishes the supremacy of man over woman within a hierarchical order of power and subordination, of protagonism and exclusion — would also bring with it the denial of the specificity and autonomy of female sexuality.

Assuming male sexuality as a paradigm, it would represent female sexuality as its "mirror image" and interpret it as a lack, a state of passivity, a void to be filled, "naturally" directing it towards reproduction and satisfying man's pleasure.

It is no coincidence then that it is women, placed at the centre of "Il bacio", who bring the focus back to the living and lived body, starting from themselves, from the emotional dimension that characterises them and from the specificity of their way of engaging in a relationship of love or friendship, affirming that sexual difference which is the antithesis of assimilation.

As Luce Irigaray teaches by deconstructing and criticising the primacy of phallic heterosexuality that brings with it the eradication of sexual difference and feminine autonomy, a woman's desire is different, widespread and multiple, like her bodily substance. And her pleasure is not localised within the genitals, her whole body participates in it.

Always denied, reduced to being secondary and hierarchically subordinate, imprisoned in the role of wife, mother or sex worker, viewed only as a body-object to be possessed, the woman in the work breaks with patriarchal tradition and tells another story, the story of a woman who recognises her right to choose which colour and which tendency to give to her love life. And, in so doing, she also opens up the possibility of a world where it is not a norm established a priori that decides which direction is given to desire, but rather it is the person who decides who and how to love in accordance with the specificity of their being and feelings.

3. A cultural revolution

It is not, therefore, an exaltation of homosexuality against heterosexuality but a collective stance against the poverty of the patriarchy put into play by a group of women, called on by Libera Mazzoleni and present in every photographic sequence to give a face to the many shades of affectivity expressed by the body.

By reminding us that we exist in the world as "embodied subjects", that masculinity cannot be the paradigm of humanity, and reminding us of the reality of sexual difference, "Il bacio" pushes for cultural revolution in the form of taking leave of patriarchy and all the philosophical and religious ideologies that have supported it.

We can then re-inhabit our bodies and experience them freely as the intimate meeting place between two people, of any sexual orientation. Together, they will choose to listen to their emotions, enacting gestures of tenderness, goodness and love that are more in keeping with their way of being and feeling.

To me, this seems to be the subversive significance of "Il bacio", the title of which recalls the work "Kiss" by Andy Warhol from 1963 and, in a certain sense, completes it in terms of its message.

Using a 16mm black and white camera, Warhol filmed 13 couples in the gesture of exchanging a kiss that did not last the ephemeral three seconds expected in Hollywood films, but three minutes, a long time that, perhaps, was intended to emphasise the intensity of the attraction that drives two people to seek such intimate contact.

Challenging the prohibitions that punished homosexuality and mixed relationships with arrest and opposing the sexist and racist morality that justified them, the film shows heterosexual and homosexual couples and a mixed couple made up of a black African American and a White-American woman exchanging intense kisses.

With that "revolutionary kiss", Warhol was ahead of his time. In fact, between 1964 and 1969, the segregation of Black people was declared illegal, the ban on mixed marriages was abolished and the "Stonewall" revolt that marked the beginning of the homosexual liberation movement took place.

Libera Mazzoleni takes up Warhol's provocation and enriches it with meaning, shining light on sexual difference, which he overlooked. She restores the dignity of an autonomous subject to women and, with this reminder, denounces the patriarchal ideology that cancels it and foments all form of sexist racism, imposing the supremacy of man over woman,

phallic heterosexuality as a norm rooted in nature and the rejection and condemnation of homosexuality as deviance.

By representing women without male filters, she reminds us that the cultural revolution initiated by Warhol is not yet complete.

Graziella Longoni